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#### **Abstract** (Article Summary)

The Connecticut Federation of Refugee Assistance Associations, a refugees' support organization, and state and local health authorities have prepared advisories in the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao and Hmong languages spoken in Southeast Asia. The warnings have been distributed mainly to anglers along the **Housatonic River**, where the state advises that most species of fish should not be eaten because of PCB contamination.

[Edith Pestana] said part of her study will be to determine exactly how various minority groups cook and eat the fish. Eating an entire fish, for example, which Pestana said is a common cultural practice among Asians, can be more risky than eating only the fillet meat because of how PCBs accumulate.

Monday, on an unusually balmy January afternoon, two fishermen were trying their luck on the bank of the channel that connects the Connecticut River to Wethersfield Cove, where Hispanics, Poles and Vietnamese and other Asians catch carp, catfish and other species.

#### **Full Text** (1144 words)

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Recent Asian refugees and other poor state residents trying to feed themselves and their families could be endangering their health by eating tainted fish they catch in the state's rivers and Long Island Sound, health experts have warned.

In several places around the state, anglers are eating their catch despite official

advisories from state health authorities that consumption should be limited or avoided because the fish could be tainted with pollutants, such as polychlorinated biphenyls, known as PCBs.

In some cases, the anglers could be unaware of the warnings because there are no signs or because of language barriers. Others are believed to be consuming the fish because of a combination of poverty and culture.

Some of the groups that health authorities are most concerned about are recent immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia, including Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians, who are fishing for carp and other species that pose a risk because of their PCB content.

The Connecticut Federation of Refugee Assistance Associations, a refugees' support organization, and state and local health authorities have prepared advisories in the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao and Hmong languages spoken in Southeast Asia. The warnings have been distributed mainly to anglers along the Housatonic River, where the state advises that most species of fish should not be eaten because of PCB contamination.

"I know that some refugees fish here {in Connecticut}, but I hope that they don't fish in that particular river," said Valyna Loeu, a social worker at the West Hartford-based refugee assistance organization. She said the organization translated health advisories into the four languages.

Several years ago, environmental officials surveyed Housatonic anglers and found that 54 percent of those using bait were eating their catch.

"Nobody knows the exact magnitude of the problem," said Edith Pestana, an epidemiologist with the state Department of Health Services who has tried to gather information about people who might be at risk because they fish to obtain food.

Later this year, Pestana plans to conduct research with graduate students from Yale University's school of public health to determine the hazards faced by people who consume PCB-tainted fish.

Not much attention has been paid to the problem, she said, because it is not a priority.

"It's not a sexy topic, like radon or like lead poisoning is right now," Pestana said. She compared it with the problem of migrant farm workers' being exposed to pesticides -- authorities know there is a problem. but have little

documentation to show its extent or severity.

The manufacture of PCBs has been outlawed in the United States, but they remain in wide use as coolants, insulators and fire retardants in electrical equipment and other machinery. The chemicals, which usually are in an oily liquid form, tend to stick to organic matter in the sediment of river bottoms and accumulate in ever greater concentrations as larger species of animals eat smaller ones on the food chain. The chemicals concentrate in fatty tissues, such as the skin of fish and their belly flesh.

In humans, they can cause liver damage, reproductive disorders and chloracne, a persistent skin rash. PCBs also are suspected of causing cancer.

The danger to subsistence anglers is not an immediate one, but rather a risk that consuming enough fish over time can raise PCB levels to dangerous concentrations in the body.

Pestana said part of her study will be to determine exactly how various minority groups cook and eat the fish. Eating an entire fish, for example, which Pestana said is a common cultural practice among Asians, can be more risky than eating only the fillet meat because of how PCBs accumulate.

"That's why we have cleaning and cooking guidelines," said William Hyatt, supervisor of fisheries management at the state Department of Environmental Protection.

Removing the skin, dark meat, belly flaps and lateral "line" area of a fish, and broiling or grilling it so that the fat drips away, can reduce PCB levels by 50 percent, according to the advisory issued jointly by the health and environmental departments.

In bodies of water other than the Housatonic, advisories apply to certain species of fish and to various groups of people. Connecticut River carp should not be eaten by pregnant women, nursing mothers, children under 15 and women who intend to become pregnant soon. All others should limit their consumption and use the preparation tips.

The same advisory applies to bluefish and striped bass caught in Long Island Sound and nearby waters.

Some states advise people to limit meals of certain species of fish suspected of being tainted by PCBs to no more than one meal a week. Hyatt said Connecticut does not have a suggested limit for fish consumption. "but you don't want to

subsist on these fish."

People continue to eat the fish on a regular basis, health authorities suspect, either because they are poor or for cultural reasons.

Monday, on an unusually balmy January afternoon, two fishermen were trying their luck on the bank of the channel that connects the Connecticut River to Wethersfield Cove, where Hispanics, Poles and Vietnamese and other Asians catch carp, catfish and other species.

Walter Janowski of Hartford, a Polish immigrant who spoke very little English, said he had caught and eaten a fish last week, and had been eating fish from the river on a regular basis. He said he was not sure what kind of fish it was.

At first, he thought he was being asked to produce his fishing license. He was surprised and appeared distressed when told about the state's advisories about the potential danger.

The state's official consumption advisory for the Connecticut River pertains to carp, because of PCBs.

"People catch carp, pike and catfish here," said Jose Perales of Wethersfield, who was fishing in the channel beneath the I-91 overpass.

"I've seen Hispanics like myself bring them home. I have friends who eat them; they make fish soup out of them," said Perales, who said he knew vaguely of an official warning about the fish there.

Vietnamese anglers take home their catches from the cove, Perales said. Once, he said, he had asked the anglers about their ethnic background out of curiosity.

He said he throws his catches back. "I tried one a long time ago and it tasted like gasoline," Perales said.

Some of the other state locations where poor anglers are likely to be catching potentially tainted fish include:

Keeney Cove, which juts from the Connecticut River into Glastonbury and East Hartford.

Lake Zoar and Lake Lillinonah, impoundments on the Housatonic River, where PCB contamination is the worst in the state because of historic dumping in the river by General Electric in Massachusetts.

The mouth of the Quinnipiac River in New Haven, where anglers from a large Puerto Rican population and from the black community fish from bridges.

The waters off Bridgeport, where people fish for eels and other species.